

Boon III

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TOO WIDE A MESH.

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"The wild world dreaming on things to come" is concentrating on a luminous figure of education which it beholds dimly, emerging from ^a the cloudy horizon. This gracious presence is to change the world, to give to all men wider possibilities, other thoughts, aims: but, alas, this Education which is to be open to all promises no more on a nearer view than to make Opportunity universal - that is, in spiritual things, he may take who has the power & he may keep who can.

The net is cast wide no doubt & brings in a mighty haul but the meshes are so ^{wide} ~~big~~ that it will only retain big fishes. Now this is the history of education since the world was & is no new thing. The medieval schools of castle or abbey, the Renaissance schools, the very schools of China, have all been conducted upon this plan. Education is for him who wants it & can take it but is no universal boon like the air we breathe or the ~~occasional~~ ^u sunshine we revel in.

We are a little sorry for the effect of this limitation upon the 'working-classes': only a small percentage of the children of these are 'big' enough to be retained in the examination net which, to do it justice, explores all waters. A few of the 'pass' men may do big things & fill big posts, but for the rest, a large percentage is, in practice, illiterate except for the spelling out of a ^{local} ~~weekly~~ 'rag' for football & ^{parish} other news.

But is the mischief ~~caused~~ confined to what we call the working-classes? Is it not a fact that in most schools the full force of instruction is turned on upon the few boys who are likely to distinguish themselves? While for the rest of the school ^{teaching} instruction is duly given no doubt but the boys find they may take it or leave it ~~as~~ the humour takes them.

^{a pair of} We were all fascinated a while ago by the story of the charming ~~franciscan~~ 'Twins'; these went through ^{a great Public School} the usual preparatory school's education & then passed on to Eton where they remained until they were nineteen; that is, they had ^{in or} twelve good years among most excellent opportunities. As they ^{attracted} were ~~charming~~ boys we may take it that their masters were not at any rate unwilling to teach them. Their record should have been quite a good one, although it is the fashion to sneer a little at Public Schools we know that ^{many have} ~~they~~ have turned ^{too him out} out ~~its full share~~ of the best & most intellectual men the country has ~~had~~ occasion for. Therefore what happened in the case of these 'Twins' does not cast any reflection upon ^{Public Schools} Eton but solely upon the system of the Big Mesh. Here are some of the things we read ^{in that delightful} in ~~this delightful~~ biography ~~which most of us have enjoyed.~~ "While in hospital after a smash at polo 'Rex' wrote to Francis, - "I enjoyed it immensely. What lucky people we are taking an interest in so many things! "

Surely here ~~was~~ material for a schoolmaster to work upon!

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Again, we read, "They never ceased to wonder at the magnificence of the world & they carried a divine innocence into soldiering & travel & sport & business & not least, - into the shadows of the Great War." And this 'wonder' of theirs was the note that marked them at school. ^{Again} what material for their instructors! "But, we read," at ~~then~~ ^{the} they showed little interest in books & later, were wont to lament to each other that they had left school wholly uneducated. (the italics are ours). Their kindly biographer & dear friend goes on to say, - "But they learnt other things, - the gift of leadership, for instance, & the power of getting alongside all varieties of human nature." But was not this nature rather than nurture, school nurture at any rate? ^{for} these gifts seem to have been a family inheritance. Born in 1880, they left school in 1899, when there follows a delightful record for the one brother of successful & adventurous sport while ~~Russ~~ ^{Russ} was soon absorbed in the city... & beginning to lament his want of education". ~~Francis~~ ^{Francis} while in Egypt was greatly impressed by Lord Cromer & writes to ~~Russ~~ ^{Russ} "he is quite the biggest man we have (..to hear him talk is worth hearing."

The two brothers correspond constantly & ~~Russ~~ takes the part of mentor to his brother. He advises him to learn the Times Leaders by heart to improve his style, - "because they are very good English."

Again, 'I will send you out next mail a very good book, Science & Education' by Professor Huxley which I have marked in several places, the sort of book you can read over again.' 'Riley' had discovered that he was very badly educated & was determined to remedy this defect. 'It don't matter.. I do believe not having ~~learned~~ learned at ~~Edon~~ ^{Edon} so long as one does so now.' " See the fine loyalty of the young man; ^h his ~~own~~ failures were not to be put down to his school!

If the schools take credit for any one thing it is that they shew their pupils 'how to learn'; but do they? We are told that 'Riley' set to work at a queer assortment of Books & writes to Francis, - " Anyone can improve his memory, the best way is by learning by heart - no matter what - & then when you think you know it ~~it~~, say it or write it.. After two or three days you are sure to forget it again & then instead of looking at ^a the book 'strain your mind' & try to remember it. Above all things always keep your mind employed. One great man (I forget which) used to see a number on a door, say 69, & tried to remember all that had happened in the years ending in 69. Or, see a horse & remember how many you have seen that day.... Asquith always learns things by heart, he never wastes a minute; as soon as he has nothing to do he picks up some book. He reads till 1:30 every night. When driving to The Temple next morning he thinks over what he has read. Result: he has a marvellous memory & knows everything."

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Think of the Herculean labours the poor fellow set for both himself & his brother! They ran a ^{intellectual} race across a ploughed field after heavy rain & the marvel is ^{made say} that they ~~set on~~ at all; ~~Yet~~ these two brothers had sufficient intellectual zeal to ~~have~~ ^{made} them great men as Ambassadors, Governors of Dominions, ~~great~~ Statesmen, what not; whereas so far as things of the mind go, they spent their days in a hopeless struggle, alert for any indication which might help them to make up lee-way, & all because according to their own confession, they 'had learned nothing at ~~school~~ school'. Here are further indications of ^{Bacon's} ~~Ross's~~ labours in the field of knowledge. "I am reading Roseberry's Napoleon & will send it to you. What a wonder he was! Never spent a moment of his life without learning something I enclose an essay from Bacon's book. Learn it by heart if you can. I have & think it a clinker.... I have also finished Life of Macaulay. I have always wondered how our great politicians & ~~literary~~ literary chaps live... I also send you a Shakespeare. I learnt Anthony's harangue to the Romans after Caesar's death; I am also trying to learn a little about electricity & railroad organization, so have my time filled up. Picwick Papers I also send to you. I have always avoided this sort of books but Dickens' works are miles funnier than the rotten novels one sees.... I have learnt one thing by my reading & my conversation with Professors, - you & I go at a subject all wrong." (That's ours)

~~Surely~~ These letters are pathetic documents &, that they are reassuring also, let us be thankful. They do go to prove that the desire of knowledge is ⁱⁿextinguishable whatever schools do or leave undone; but have these nothing to answer for when a pursuit which should yield ^{ever recurring repentment} little but joie de vivre becomes dogged labour over heavy roads with little ^{pleasure in} ~~joy of~~ progress, ~~only~~ ~~a desire to get there, to know something in the end.~~

Here, again, is another evidence of the ~~manifestations~~ limitations attending an utter absence of education. A cultivated sense of humour is a great fact ⁱⁿ a joyous life, but these young men are without it. Perhaps the youth ~~addicted~~ addicted to sports usually fails to appreciate delicate nonsense; ^{they sports} Sports are too strenuous to admit of a subtler, more airy kind of play, & we read, - 'Riv' heard Mr Balfour & Lord Reay praising Alice in Wonderland. Deeply impressed he bought the book & read it as soon as he returned to London & read it earnestly. To his horror he saw no sense in it. Then it struck him that it might be meant as nonsense & he had another try, when he concluded that it was rather funny but he remained disappointed."

We ~~need not~~ ^{felt} follow the career of these interesting men further. Both ~~and~~ early, before they were forty. Their fine qualities & their personal fascination remained with them till the end, as did also, alas, their invincible ignorance. They laboured indefatigably but as 'Riv' remarked they went to work the wrong way, - 'you

I go as a moped all wrong'.

The schools must tell us why men who attain mediocre successes & the personal favour due to charming manners & sweet natures were yet somewhat depressed & disappointed on account of the ignorance which they made blind & futile efforts to correct, but they never got so far as to learn that knowledge is delightful "because one likes it", & that no effort at self-education can do anything until one has found out this supreme delightfulness of knowledge.

It must be noted that this failure of a great school to fulfil its purpose occurred between twenty & thirty years ago, & that no educational body has made more well-considered & enlightened advances than have the Headmasters of the great Public Schools, but probably that delightful group of Eton boys in 'Conningsby' has always been & is to-day typical; There is a certain knightly character in the fine bearing & intelligent countenances of the Head boys one comes across ^{there} which speaks well for their intellectual activity. The only question is whether more might not be done with the average boy.

The ^{un}function of the schools is no doubt to feed their scholars on knowledge until they have created in them a healthy appetite which they will go on satisfying for themselves day by day throughout life. We must give up the farce of teaching young people how to learn, which is just as

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felicitous as a labour & just as necessary as to teach a child the motions of eating without offering him food, & studies which are ^{pursued} taught with a view to improve the mind must in future take a back seat.

the multitudinous things that every person wants to know ~~must~~ must be made accessible in the schoolroom, not by diagrams, digests & abstract principles, but boys & girls, like Kit's little brother, must learn what 'oysters' is by supping on oysters. There is absolutely no avenue to knowledge but knowledge itself, & the schools must begin, not by qualifying the mind to deal with knowledge, but by affording the best books containing all the sorts of knowledge which these 'Twins' like everyone else ^{wanted to} would fain know. We have to face two difficulties. We do not believe in children as intellectual persons nor in knowledge as requisite & necessary for intellectual life. It is a pity that education is conducted in camera save for the examination lists which shew how the best pupils in a school have acquitted themselves, the half-dozen or dozen best in a big school. Finely conscientious as teachers are they can hardly fail to give undue importance to their group of candidates, ^{in examination} & a school of four or five hundred stands or falls by a dozen head boys. ~~I am acting contrary to school tradition in introducing a large number of children's papers into this volume, probably most teachers who read these~~

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